

TO: San Rafael City Council

DATE: February 13, 2026

RE: Appealing the decision to construct an urbanizing 17-story skyscraper at 700 Irwin that would be unhealthy for its 200 occupants and with the increase in already seriously congested traffic conditions, unhealthy for San Rafael residents and visitors.

FROM: Alezz Laielen. As a long-time San Rafael resident and participated in a citizen's "Visioning Committee" when Al Boro was San Rafael's mayor.

In the 80's I obtained a \$55,400 matching grant from Beryl Buck's Trust when it was managed by the San Francisco Foundation for the renovation of the historic West Point Inn, that had been a stop on the "crookedest railroad" that wound its way to the top of Mt. Tamalpais. I served as general contractor and designed a blend-in addition to house the innkeeper and provide more restrooms for the hike-in, bike-in public.

After Marin County took back the managing of Berl Buck's Trust from the San Francisco Foundation and the Marin Community Foundation was formed, Marin residents heard that there was also to be a Buck Center for Research on Aging. At first residents thought it was going to be a place where they could go to research their health, healing and aging processes. Through an MD that worked at Commonweal in West Marin I was introduced to a Rockefeller that gifted me money from her trust to do a survey to introduce the idea of having consumer health library to be located in San Rafael and modelled after Planetree in San Francisco that was also in other locations. The results were favorable. Especially women, were interested and willing to pay a nominal fee for access to integrative as well as conventional medical information that Planetree provided and helped with replicating itself that included what it would contain and operating costs that weren't that much. I'd thought maybe the Buck Center for Research on Aging could help fund a Planetree. It wouldn't have cost very much. Then it was discovered that the Center was going to be a pharmaceutical drug reach facility that didn't even want a library on their campus.

I've called Marin County home ever since moving here with my family from Eureka when I was eight years old. People find it a desirable place to live because it is a suburb with some rural areas that provides a pleasant, more health enhancing environment that is different than our urbanized neighbor San Francisco. San Rafael is a city in the suburb of Marin. **A simple definition of a suburb is that a suburb does not have urbanizing skyscrapers.** If I wanted to live in an urbanized city with skyscrapers I'd move to one. Some people thrive in an urbanized city environment like San Francisco, while I would not. I strongly object to California politicians that think it is OK to incentivize real estate developers to build whatever they want along as it is near a train and take my right and my choice to live in a suburb free from urbanizing skyscrapers away from me and other San Rafael and Marin County residents.

But preserving Marin County as a suburb with its rural areas, and San Rafael as a city in a suburb is not the only reason I am appealing the decision made by the San Rafael Planning Commission on January 14 to allow a 17-story urbanizing skyscraper that were forced into doing so.

that is to contain 200 individuals and their cars to be stacked inside it to be constructed at 700 Irwin. that is it is situated at the busy, noisy, often congested entrance to San Rafael from Freeway 101 and the noisy, auto polluting Freeway 101 over pass.

The existing building at 700 Irwin is an attractively designed four-story office building. While I've been told that office buildings are becoming obsolete the current four-story building could be used for other things that could benefit San Rafael residents, maybe like a consumer health library modeled after Planetree. The best way to "fight" disease is to learn about how one's unique body functions and how to help maintain, improve and regaining one's health and healing processes. It could also be a place to network with others about health issues.

The reason I'm talking about how the office building at 700 Irwin could utilized is because I am not only against having a 17-story skyscraper built at that location, **I am against having any structure that houses people 24/7 to be constructed at that location that would have required the zoning that would have been for commercial to be changed to residential. I'm saying the zoning needs to go back to commercial.** Why?

700 Irwin is located where four lanes of cars and trucks enter San Rafael from Freeway 101, then generally stop and idle until they can proceed into San Rafael. This is also an area where people are trying to get on Freeway 101 going South or North. Above 700 Irwin is the 101 Freeway over pass with I don't know how many cars and trucks whizzing by 24/7. Then there is the ding-dong-ding-clang of the SMART train every half an hour when its gates are lowered to stop traffic and cut across San Rafael.

A headline on the Urban Institute website reads: "**Highway Pollution Near Multifamily Homes Hurts Residents, but Zoning and Transportation Reform Could Help**"

Research shows that living within a few hundred meters of a busy, polluting freeway significantly increases risks of chronic health problems due to traffic-related air pollution (TRAP), including ultrafine particles, nitrogen oxides, and black carbon.

Major health impacts include asthma onset and aggravation, reduced lung function, cardiovascular disease, stroke, lung cancer, and premature mortality.

Key Health Problems Associated with Freeway Proximity

- **Respiratory Issues:** High rates of asthma, particularly in children, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), coughs, wheezing, and reduced lung capacity.
- **Cardiovascular Disease:** Increased risk of heart attacks, stroke, and accelerated calcification of arteries.

- **Indoor Air Quality:** Pollution from nearby freeways can seep into apartments, affecting indoor air quality and making residents vulnerable even when inside.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** People in apartments near freeways often include lower-income groups and minorities, who experience greater health burdens from these environmental hazards.

The American Lung Association as well as the Urban Institute are places to do further research.

IN SUMMARY: It would be inhumane to allow the construction of ANY building at 700 Irwin that would house individuals 24/7. San Rafael City Council needs to reverse their approval and say “No.”

When the Marin Independent Journal reported that the San Rafael Planning Commission had approved the urbanizing, 17-story skyscraper on January 14th, it also reported that the developer’s attorney told them they had little choice. **“You’re really between a rock and state law,”** the lawyer, Andrew Junius, told commissioners shortly before their vote. One commissioner said due to state laws, that all they could do was rubber stamp proposals for developers from out of town and not make choices for San Rafael residents. The state laws Mr. Junius was referring to laws conceived by democrat Senator Weiner with the latest one being SB79.

Senator Weiner has gotten many beneficial laws passed. What is written about Senator Weiner’s recently passed SB 79 (and I don’t know where he gets the facts to back up the superlatives that are highlighted) is that: *“ it unwinds decades of overly restrictive land use policies that have driven housing costs to astronomical levels, forcing millions of people to move far away from jobs and transit, to face massive commutes, or to leave California entirely. By allowing more homes to be built near public transportation, SB 79 also strengthens our transit systems, increases transit ridership, and reduces traffic congestion and carbon emissions. It’s been a long road to tackle these decades-old problems, but thanks to Governor Newsom’s leadership, today marks a new day for affordable housing and public transportation in California.”*

However, Senator Weiner was born in the densely populated city of New Jersey on the East Coast and now lives in San Francisco. That he is a “city dweller” appears to be influencing his vision for California including suburbs like Marin County and cities and towns in the suburbs like San Rafael. What Senator Weiner has done is to give real estate developers financial incentives to put profit over people with the residents being forced to accept having large, unhealthy, urbanizing, blighting, traffic congesting developments in their communities dictated by California State laws.

Does Senator Weiner or his financially incentivized developers, or the members of our San Rafael City Council know or care that living near a busy, polluting freeway significantly increases risks of chronic health problems?

While living in existing apartments near freeways elevates cancer constructing a 17-story skyscraper to house 200 people and their cars at 700 Irwin would be putting the health of unknowing potential occupants at risk. It should be noted that Marin County voted down a number of times having a SMART train that was labelled “dumb” and a “train to nowhere”. Then politicians got involved and combined the vote with Sonoma County and it was Sonoma County’s vote that got it passed.

While living in existing apartments near freeways elevates cancer constructing a 17-story skyscraper to house 200 people and their cars at 700 Irwin would be putting the health of unknowing potential occupants at risk. It should be noted that Marin County voted down a number of times having a SMART train that was labelled “dumb” and a “train to nowhere”. Then politicians got involved and combined the vote with Sonoma County and it was Sonoma County’s vote that got it passed.

700 Irwin is currently owned by BioMarin Pharmaceuticals Inc, a global biotechnology company that focuses on developing and commercializing therapies for people with rare genetic diseases. Its main campus in San Rafael is where the former San Rafael Corporate Center used to be. Primarily located around Lindero Street its key addresses include 770 Lindero Street and extends to buildings on adjacent streets like Lincoln Avenue (e.g., 791 Lincoln Ave) and properties near Third Street, BioMarin forms a significant downtown footprint.

Solomon Cordwell Buenz (SBC) architectural was chosen to design the urbanizing 17- story structure for Urban Pacific Development Pacific. **SBC** is a firm that is known for designing large, complex buildings for airports, corporations etc., as well as skyscrapers in cities like Chicago and other metropolitan areas and markets itself as at the forefront of **dense urban living**.

SBC designed a 50-story skyscraper that developers wanted to build at 2700 Sloat Blvd. in the Sunset area near the beach where there are 2-3 story homes. Residents protested loudly. San Francisco said it was ridiculous - like plopping the Salesforce Tower (the tallest skyscraper in the San Francisco Financial District) on the beach and said “NO”. Along with the property owner and the construction company, **SBC** was named in the lawsuit filed against SF. There is more to this story that can be found on the internet along with a happy ending. This outrageous, blighting eyesore was not built. A photo is enclosed.

I would hope that the job of our San Rafael Planning Commission is to help maintain the environment of our suburban City of San Rafael for us residents and a healthy environment for

potential residents. I feel it is cruel that BioMarin has wanted to build a skyscraper in the 700 Irwin location.

As a note: With a skyscraper there is also the issue of privacy. The four-story office building currently located at 700 Irwin can be seen from my kitchen, dining area and back deck and I'm not the only one. However, with its looming, out of place, blighting presence, a 17-story skyscraper would allow any resident with a telescope to invade the privacy of hundreds of San Rafael residents.

Photos have been included. A picture is worth a thousand words.

1. A copy of headline from the Urban Institute that reads: **Highway Pollution near Multifamily Homes Hurts Residents, but Zoning and Transportation Reform Could Help.**
2. An arial view of 700 Irwin with the 4-story office building surrounded by traffic.
3. The beginning paragraph of what the IJ published on January 15 that says that the attorney for the developers threatened the San Rafael Planning Commission if 17-story skyscraper proposed for 700 Irwin that will cause major traffic congestion for San Rafael residents in an area that already suffers from traffic congestion wasn't approved.
4. The bland black and grey drawing submitted by the developers to the city that was circulated on Nextdoor.com.
5. The color rendering that was shown in a slide at the January 14 meeting that I photographed that shows the alarming, proposed 17-story urbanizing skyscraper looming above all the other surrounding buildings.
6. A photo from my back deck, kitchen and dining room that shows the roof of the attractively designed office building at 700 Irwin and how close it is to the freeway entrance to San Rafael and overpass that produces 24/7 pollution and noise.
7. A photo of the totally out of place proposed 50-story skyscraper that was designed by SBC architectural that developers wanted to build on Sloat Blvd. San Francisco said it was ridiculous and voted NO.

P.S. (Under SB 330 in order to qualify for high bonus density, the nearest rail line must have at least 16 passenger rail stations. Smart train in Marin only has 6 rail stations.)

Thank you Members of the City Council for reversing your decision and saying NO.

My name is Alezz Laielen. I am a long-time San Rafael resident that attended meetings years ago regarding the replacement of the Macy's building. The developer/architect that most of us that attended the meetings wanted was not chosen. We thought it might be a "follow the money" situation like it might be now.

Also some years back I obtained a matching \$54,500 grant from Beryl Buck's Trust for the renovation of the West Point Inn on Mt. Tamalpais that was being managed by the San Francisco Foundation. This was just before the SF Foundation tried to alter the trust that was intended to help those in Marin.

I am appealing the decision made by San Rafael Planning Commission on January 14 to allow a 17-story skyscraper to be constructed at 700 Irwin. Jennifer Manier also a also a resident of San Rafael that said I could also include her name. I'm sure there would be many other residents that would sign on but 5 days isn't very much time to "muster the troops."

My argument that I've posted on Nextdoor.com is that one of the main things that makes Marin desirable is that it is a suburb with some rural areas that provides a pleasant, more health enhancing environment that is different than urbanized San Francisco.

A simple definition of a suburb is that A SUBURB DOES NOT HAVE SKYSCRAPERS. San Rafael is city in the suburb of Marin. I would hope that job of our San Rafael Planning Commission is to help maintain the environment of our suburban city of San Rafael for us residents and protect it from being destroyed forever.

This is what will happen if you don't rescind the approval you gave on Tuesday night to the Boat Haus project, the 17-story skyscraper designed by Solomon Cordwell Buenz (SBC) for Urban Pacific Development Pacific development on property that is owned by the Biotec Marin Pharmaceutical and is next to the 101 highway overpass and the often congested entrance to San Rafael.

SBC is a firm that designs giant buildings for airports, corporations etc., as well as skyscrapers in cities like Chicago, etc and markets itself as at the forefront of **dense urban living. If you allow one skyscraper to be built in San Rafael YOU KNOW THERE WILL BE MORE.**

Research has shown that BioMarin owns the property, Urban developers want to build it and the architectural firm that designed it is SBC.com. SBC architects are known for designing super large structures for corporations, and airports and now residential skyscrapers. They designed a 50-story skyscraper in San Francisco the developers wanted to build in San Francisco at 2700 Sloat build on Sloat Blvd. in the Sunset area near the beach in San Francisco where there are one two story homes. Residents protested loudly. San Francisco said it was ridiculous like plopping the Salesforce Tower (the tallest skyscraper in the San Francisco Financial District) on the beach and said NO. SBC was named in the lawsuit filed against SF along with the property owner and construction company. There is more to this story that you can find on the internet. Francisco. It had a happy ending. It wasn't built.

I can see the four-story building currently occupies 700 Irwin from my kitchen, living room and back deck. that exists that is very close to the 101-freeway overpass, and has the busy, noisy, often congested entrance to San Rafael below.

I have included some photos because a picture is worth a thousand words.

1. The beginning paragraph of what the IJ published on January 15 how the attorney for the developers threatened the San Rafael Planning Commission if Commissioners didn't approve the 700 Irwin skyscraper.
2. The black and grey drawing submitted by the developers to the city.
3. The color rendering that was shown in a slide at the January 14 meeting that I photographed that shows it looming above all the other surrounding builds and will be easily seen from other residents that live in surrounding hills.
4. A photo from my back deck that shows the current building at 700 Irwin.
5. A photo of the proposed 50-story that SBC architect designed to be built on Sloat Blvd. in San Francisco that was stopped.

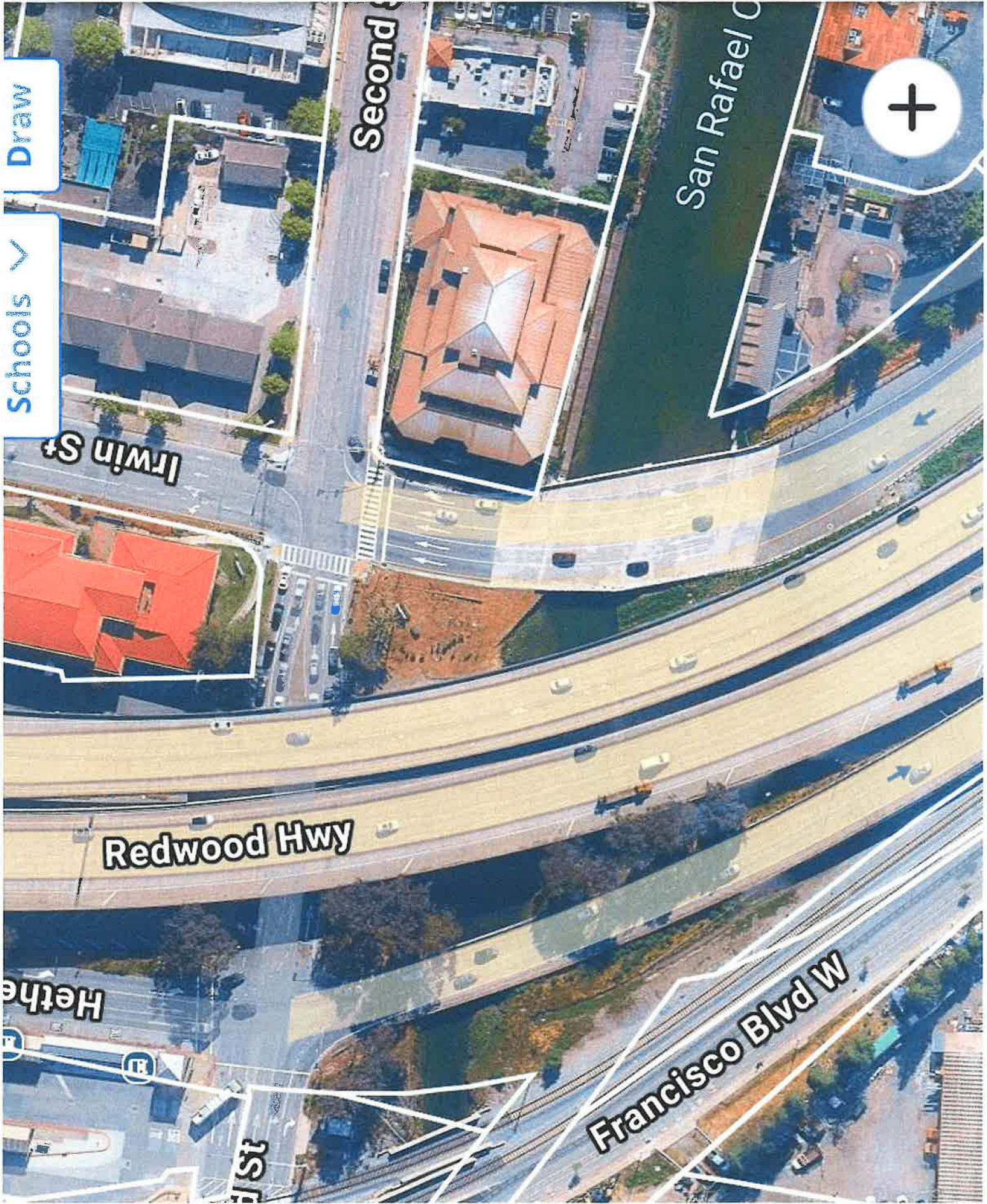
Thank you for considering this appeal that and excuse all the typos. I don't have time to edit it.



Highway Pollution Near Multifamily Homes Hurts Residents, but Zoning and Transportation Reform Could Help

Will Curran-Groome, Yonah Freemark

October 16, 2024



Schools ▾ Draw



Marin Independent Journal

PUBLISHED: January 15, 2026 at 5:40 PM PST | UPDATED: January 15, 2026 at 5:59 PM PST



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The San Rafael Planning Commission approved a 17-story, 200-apartment building this week after a reminder from the developer's attorney that it had little choice.

"You're really between a rock and state law," the lawyer, Andrew Junius, told commissioners shortly before the vote Tuesday. "I think it's going to be very hard for you to make any changes to this project."

"We already know that, so we don't need to be told," commissioner Stewart Summers said.

Commissioner Jack Salvemini said, "Sometimes it feels like we rubber-stamp things because it fits within the state and city mandates. As a commission, all we can do is say yes. It doesn't seem like I'm making choices for the residents of San Rafael. It feels like I'm making choices for developers from out of town."

ed from the Marin IJ.

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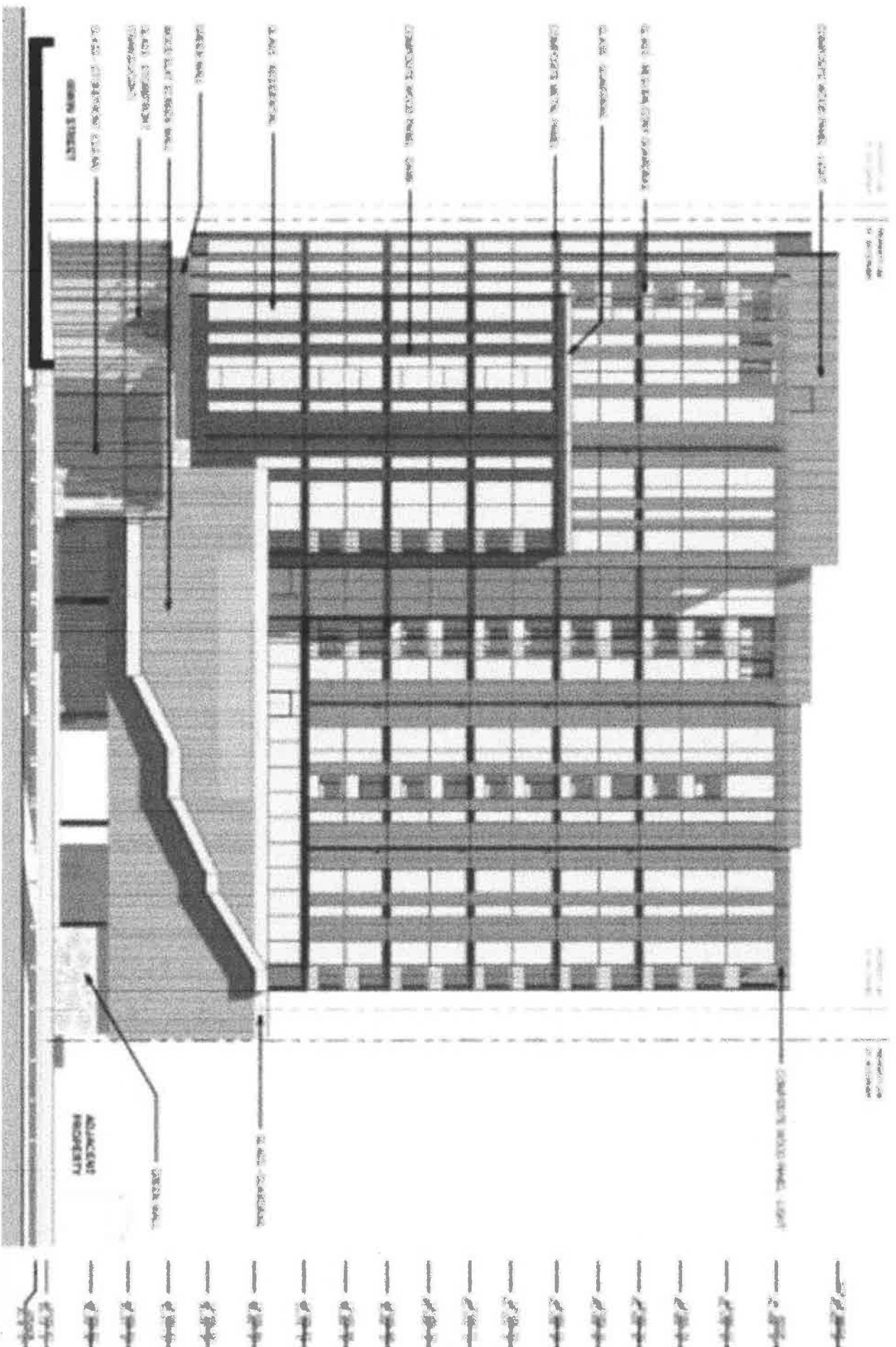
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Marin Independent Journal

San Rafael commission approves 200-apartment high-rise

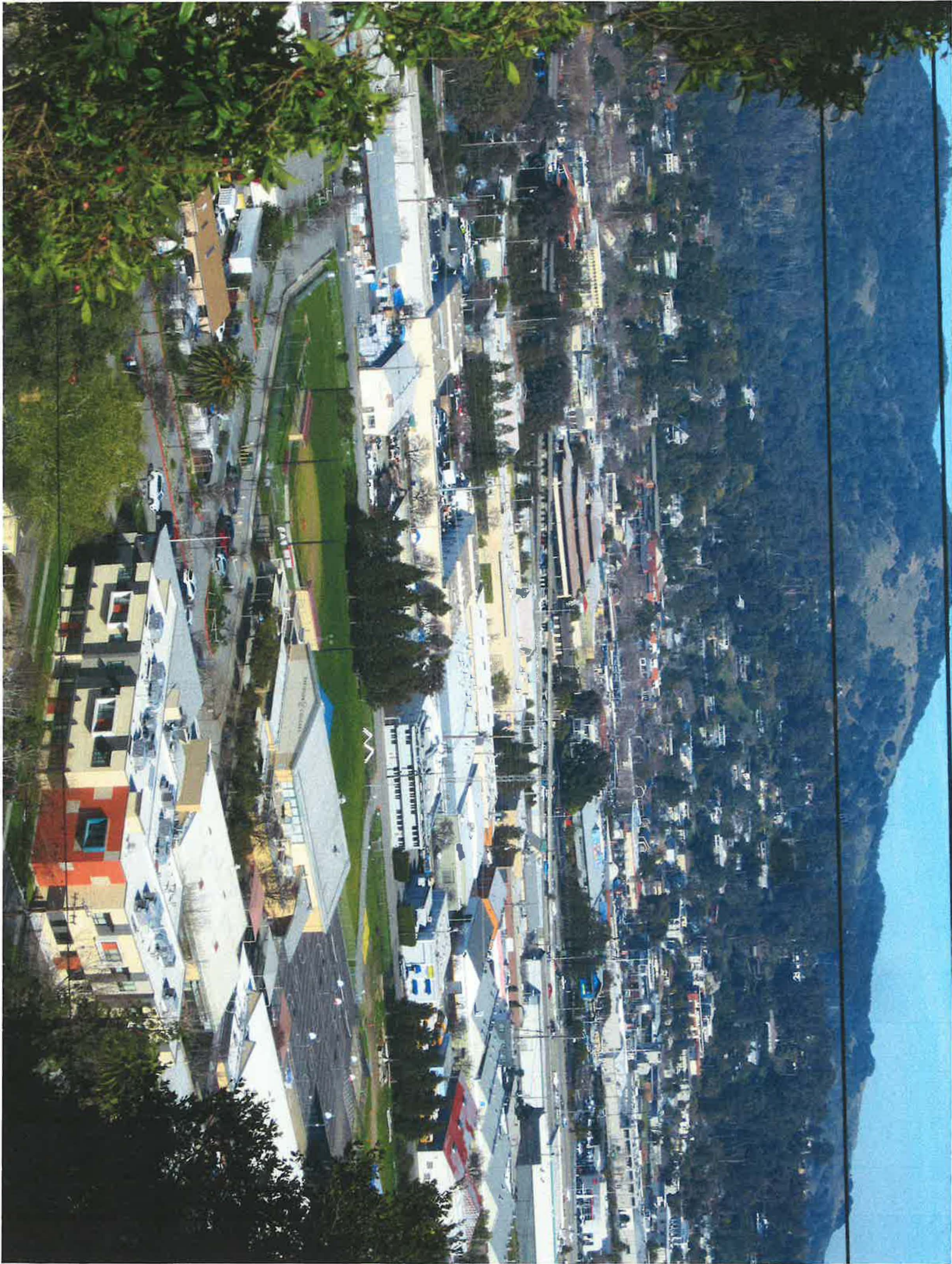


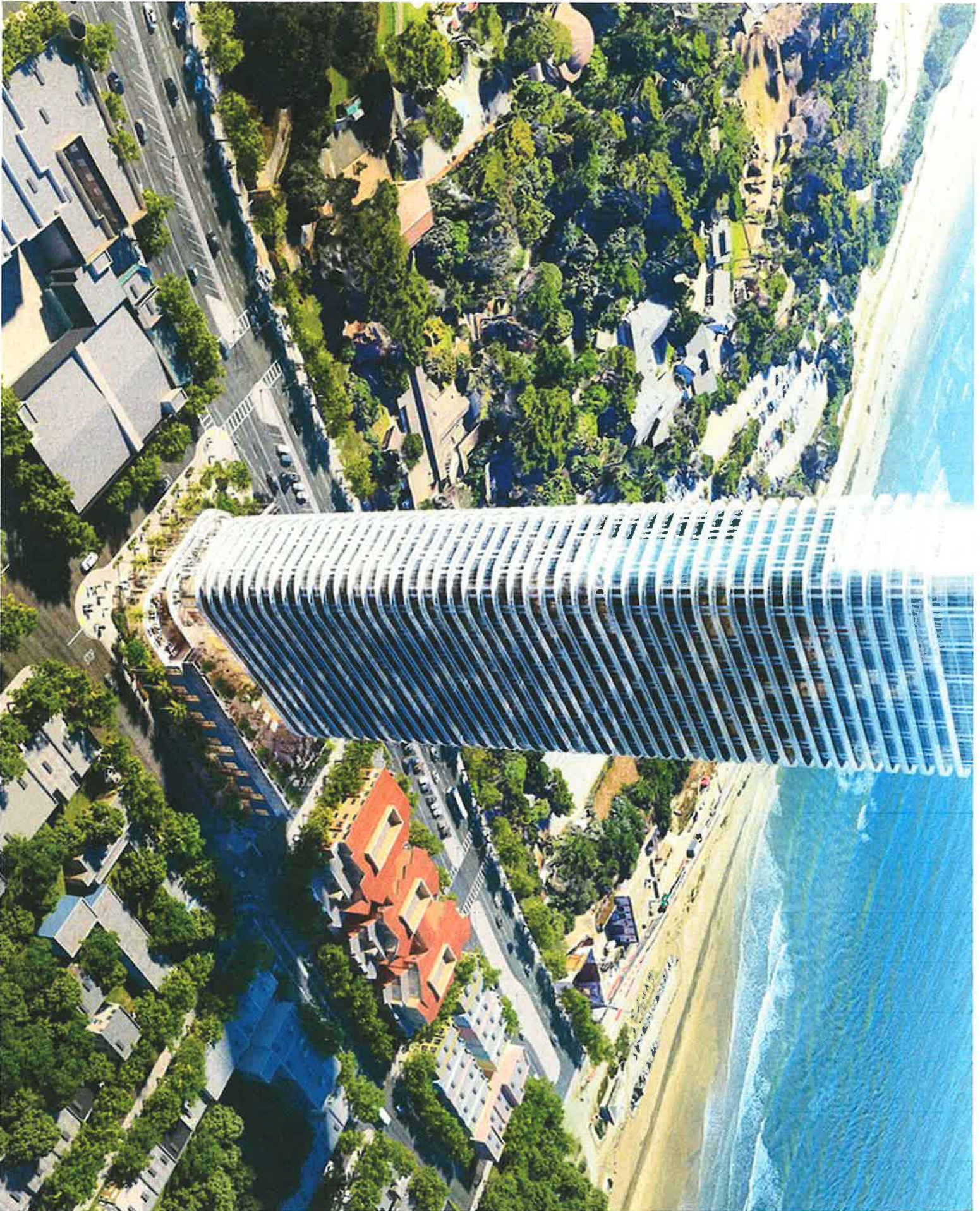


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MARIN

Marin Magazine February 2026

Crisis on Our Doorstep: The Looming Housing Crisis in Marin County

by Jason Elliott 7 days ago



Aerial view of the waterfront town of Sausalito, California, with housing prices

As many counties in California continue to make strides towards creating more affordable housing, Marin is still lagging in its efforts. California is a tapestry of 58 counties, spanning rural mountain forests to dense downtowns. Each community is unique, but the need to build housing is universal – and California has underproduced housing for 40 years. As a recent *New York Times* article succinctly put it: "California's housing crisis is well documented and severe."

Having spent the better part of two decades in the trenches of the State's housing wars, I have seen the devastating outcomes of this, first hand. My first foray into housing politics was while growing up in the wealthy city of Palo Alto. I watched as the local government systematically made it harder for new people to move in, and quickly learned the power municipalities had to shape a community, for better or for worse. Today, I live in San Francisco, while my whole family still lives in the Bay Area — for me, this is home. So when I started in politics, fresh out of grad school two decades ago, there was no other place I wanted to work than in the California government. I chose

A STEP IN THE — RIGHT DIRECTION

WHAT?

MEASURE J: Adopts overlay zoning on 12 sites in the City's commercial districts, for housing at various income levels including seniors, families and individuals.

MEASURE K: Adopts overlay zoning for housing on a portion of Martin Luther King Jr. property. Provides capacity for a maximum of 50 units prioritized for seniors, while maintaining recreational, dog park and school uses.

WHY?

Compliance with state law requires the City to construct at least 724 housing units for various income levels from 2023–2031. If this capacity was not met outright, state law then required rezoning to ensure capacity for the 724 housing units. Measures J & K together completed this rezoning program.

More info at sausalito.gov.

to pursue a career in public service to shape communities for the better.

During my first 10 years in government, I worked for a number of San Francisco Mayors, watching as the city struggled to balance its progressive values with a regressive, exclusionary housing apparatus. We were supposed to be the good guys, building a diverse, inclusive city where everyone could find a place. Put that in contrast with Marin, which for decades insulated itself from the housing crisis by virtue of the county's geography, wealth and political clout.

Fast-forward to 2026, and while much of the State is making strides towards developing more affordable housing, Marin still finds itself at a crossroads. Despite the Board of Supervisors making meaningful progress with housing, a number of small cities continue to resist housing as a political credo.

A LOOK AT HOW WE GOT HERE

Over the years, Marin cemented its reputation through state legislative carveouts, and for years this strategy worked. Marin successfully exempted itself from the full force of laws intended to increase density. The result was a castle-and-moat approach to regional planning: restaurant workers and landscapers could commute in from Vallejo or Richmond, but there was no place for them to live in Marin.

According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), the State of California has “added 3.6 million housing units and 9.4 million residents,” since 1990. In short: we're underbuilding. Meanwhile, Zillow's Home Value Index report shows that California currently has the second highest median home price in the country, while a McKinsey & Company report from 2018 California ranked 49th out of 50 states in housing production, per capita. Closer to home, Marin was found to have one of the highest median home prices, both in the state and in the country, as reported late last year by the California Association

“

While much of the State is making strides towards developing more affordable housing, Marin still finds itself at a crossroads.

”

of Realtors (CAR). Great for existing homeowners — catastrophically prohibitive for families trying to move in to grow the community, or move back home to be closer to family.

This scarcity is not an accident of the market, but rather a product of policy. It is the result of thousands of decisions made by local city councils to suppress growth, ban apartment complexes and foist the problem on neighboring cities and counties — usually home to low-income individuals and communities of color.

That is until 2018, when Gavin Newsom was elected governor. While serving in Governor Newsom's office as Deputy Chief of Staff, I oversaw the implementation of a statewide, aggressive new housing strategy. In the leadup to this approach, it became clear that the State could no longer subsidize the exclusivity of wealthy counties while the rest of the state bore the burden of high housing demands.

As part of the new policy, California moved to become an active enforcer of laws — applicable to everyone, everywhere in the state — that require more zoning and building. Housing targets became binding legal obligations, rather than “aspirational goals” cities could ignore without penalty. The Housing Accountability Unit (HAU) was also established in 2021 within the Department of Housing and Community

Development to help enforce this. Staffed with attorneys and investigators, the HAU helps identify cities that were breaking the law and bring them into compliance. And when cities like Huntington Beach or Anaheim tried to defy state housing laws, the state sued them and won. There are dozens of other examples from Norwalk and Elk Grove to Woodside.

In the years that followed, I saw elected officials, through policy awakening or under threat of state sanction, finally embrace more housing. Politicians like San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie and city supervisors like Myrna Melgar, for example, who recently chose to adopt the most ambitious city-wide densification in decades. Or East Bay Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks, who led the charge in early 2025 to slash through the reams of red tape that constrained urban and suburban housing from getting built.

A decade ago, the politics of being unabashedly in favor of housing were insurmountable. Now, they're default mode in most places around California — but not everywhere. As the Bay Area economy boomed and hundreds of thousands of jobs created, Marin's housing stock remained frozen. This has resulted in the ratio of jobs created to housing units permitted in Marin being among the worst in the state. "Marin must build more than 14,000 homes by 2031. Unfortunately, their progress so far in meeting this obligation has fallen short, permitting only 300 units since 2023. Marin can and must do better," explains California's Housing Director, Gustavo Velasquez.

THE TRUE COST OF IT ALL

It can be difficult to grasp the consequences of the decades-long resistance to increasing affordable housing, especially when paired with jargon-filled discussions like sites inventories, parking minimums and regional housing needs determination cycles. But cut through the noise and you'll begin to see the true ramifications of Marin's historical obstructionism.

There is first the human cost. The teacher who works in Mill Valley but lives in Woodland, spending two hours a day in a car instead of grading papers or sleeping. It is the nurse at the MarinHealth hospital who clocks out after a 12-hour shift and faces a grueling commute on 680 because there isn't an apartment she can afford within 20 miles. It's the empty chair at the family dinner table. The adult children who cannot afford a starter house in their old hometown. "So many of the people who make up the economic backbone of Marin are excluded from the opportunity they help create," says Velasquez.

Then there's the environmental impact. Every time Marin blocks an apartment building near a rail station or a highway, the county forces development further away from job centers. This means more super-commuters on the road, and more carbon pollution destroying the planet. You cannot claim to be an environmentalist while opposing infill housing — the two positions are mutually exclusive.

A PATH FORWARD

So where does the county go from here? One possible solution is responsible planned growth.

Imagine a Marin where local commercial corridors are vibrant and fully leased because there are enough residents to support small businesses. Imagine a school district that doesn't face constant budget cuts due to declining enrollment, because young families can actually afford to live there. Imagine a community where adult children can live down the street from you, rather than a Zoom call away.

Growth does not mean skyscrapers in Stinson Beach. It means a handful more duplexes in single-family neighborhoods. It means two stories of housing above some stores downtown.

Marin has spent decades saying "no," but the state has finally said enough — not because Sacramento hates Marin, but because California needs Marin to be part of the solution.

THE BUILDER'S REMEDY

Another consequence of local governments falling out of compliance with housing law is that they open themselves up to what's called the "Builder's Remedy."

Summed up, this state law says local governments that are not in compliance with housing law lose authority to deny housing projects. As long as these Builder's Remedy projects meet certain affordability criteria, they can be as big as and as tall as (not to mention located wherever) the developer wants — and the city can't stop them. No consideration for traffic impacts, neighborhood consistency or sincere environmental concerns.

In Marin, we are already seeing this play out, in cities like Belvedere and Fairfax, where applications have already been submitted. I understand the fear these Builder's Remedy projects bring about, and there has to be a middle ground between "no growth" and "destroying Marin." It's both reasonable to acknowledge the generic need for more housing while also considering the merits of a specific development.

OPINION > LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Marin IJ Readers' Forum for Feb. 1, 2025

By **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

PUBLISHED: January 31, 2025 at 12:58 PM PST

Downtown San Rafael housing plans are needed

After reading coverage in the IJ news section about new potential housing developments in downtown San Rafael, I can say I firmly disagree with several recently published letters in opposition. In fact, I find the proposals encouraging.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion; it's the opinion page after all. But after spending three years as the steering committee chair for San Rafael's General Plan 2040, I learned only 10 housing units were built from 2011 to 2021. I think that fact supersedes those opinions as San Rafael confronts this crisis. Building only one unit per year for 10 years is clearly not enough.

While we may not want San Rafael to become a "big city like San Francisco or Oakland," we do want it to stay vibrant. We want it to have a lively downtown attracting new businesses and restaurants. We want it to be a town for future generations.

But if you don't build it, they won't come.

A recent article ("San Rafael's latest housing prospect: High-rise with 180 apartments," Jan. 15) describes a 180-unit apartment proposal for 700 Irwin St. as one example of high-rise development generating outcry to keep San Rafael a "low-rise community."

Opponents might focus on details in the story about the developer's performance on projects in other cities. I think the focus should be on San Rafael's need for housing. This would still be 20 times more units than in that previous 10-year period.

The current state of the site is notable. It's no longer the bustling title company it was years ago. It sits empty and surrounded by cyclone fencing. Let's be open to the possibility that redevelopment can bring, because housing is needed and welcome, in all forms.

— Stephanie Plante, Tiburon

Housing delays could shape the next generation's future

Marinwood Plaza in unincorporated San Rafael is one of Marin County's slowest-moving housing sites — a place where proposals have appeared, stalled, disappeared and reappeared for well over a decade.

I am a student at The Branson School. When Supervisor Mary Sackett mentioned this to my sociology of housing class, the room went quiet. I think we all felt it — frustration, confusion, disbelief. How could something so simple — building homes — become so impossible? I enrolled in this class expecting to learn about buildings and design. But instead, I've learned that building affordable housing in Marin isn't just about having blueprints or land; it's about policy, privilege and the specific values a community chooses to prioritize — like preserving space, maintaining small-town character and resisting growth.

For a county that sees itself as progressive, it's painful to watch housing stay frozen while my generation wonders if we'll ever be able to have a future in the place that raised us.

This dissonance compelled me to look deeper into thought on one of the projects Sackett mentioned: the Marinwood Apartments project. The plan is to redevelop an underused plaza into 125 affordable housing units and keep the existing Marinwood Market, seen by proponents as a long overdue step toward allowing more families the chance to belong in Marin. And it raises a bigger question about who gets to live near their work, who gets to raise their family here and who gets pushed out of a community they've helped build.

The proposed units for this development would be reserved for residents earning between 30% and 70% of Marin's median income. This means homes for teachers, restaurant staff, nurses and others whose jobs are essential to Marin but currently

can't afford to live here. Every morning, 60% of people working for the county drive in from other counties. It's hard to know what percentage of Marin's total workforce commutes from outside of Marin, but I know some of these people are my teachers, coaches and mentors who have shaped who I am today — yet they can't afford to live in the place they've poured their lives into.

It's heartbreaking that the people who invest the most in our communities are the ones pushed the furthest away by intentional opposition to increases in affordable housing options.

The fact that Marinwood Plaza has been underutilized for years with various housing proposals exemplifies how complicated developing affordable housing can be. In 2014, a study by the Marin Economic Forum examined the potential effects of a previous housing proposal for Marinwood Plaza on attendance at the Miller Creek School, predicting an increase of 40 to 100 additional students. This idea was enough to spark fears and outcry over significant tax increases in the surrounding neighborhood and contributed to a decision that halted the project. But what struck me the most was the actual predicted cost. The report showed the additional cost of the increased student enrollment would be about \$5 to \$24 per household per year, a number that made me question what Marin values most.

For about the cost of a couple cups of coffee a year, Marin residents could support the idea of belonging over exclusion, giving families the chance to call Marin home. I keep thinking about how that tiny cost compares to what's lost when people are priced out: teachers leaving, close friends moving away and a fading of a shared community.

I've watched teachers commute from hours away because living here isn't an option. I've watched classmates move because their families couldn't afford to stay. It hurts to know that these choices aren't accidents but appear to be the deliberate outcome of opposition and inaction toward affordable housing.

After all, why is it so difficult for this community to live up to the values we students are taught every day in school? To welcome others with kindness; to treat people as we want to be treated; to build an inclusive community.

The project to build apartments in Marinwood reminded me that affordable housing isn't about changing Marin — it's about protecting the parts of it worth keeping: compassion, connection and the idea that a home should be something we share, not something we shield away. My classmates and I are already wondering whether Marin will be a place we can return to, or only the place we grew up in.

If Marin waits another decade, I am concerned that my generation won't be choosing to leave — we simply won't have a place left to return.

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The Housing Crisis and Marin County

Introduction:

Marin County, California, occupies a unique position in the American landscape, often cited as a premier example of "exclusive prosperity." Located just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, it combines extreme wealth and world-class health outcomes with a historic, multi-decade resistance to development.

The Profile of Prosperity

Marin is consistently defined by its "top-tier" status across nearly every socio-economic metric:

- **Wealth & Income:** It regularly ranks among the top counties in the U.S. for per capita income. The median home price as of late 2025 sits near **\$1.5 million**, with exclusive enclaves like Ross and Belvedere reaching far higher.
- **Prominent Residents:** Its natural beauty has long attracted global icons, from George Lucas (whose "Skywalker Ranch" is a county landmark) to Sean Penn and Metallica's James Hetfield.
- **Health & Longevity:** Marin is frequently ranked as the **healthiest county in California**. Residents enjoy a life expectancy of approximately **85.2 years**, supported by high rates of physical activity and superior access to clinical care.
- **Natural Beauty:** Approximately **84% of the county's land** is protected open space, watersheds, or parks, including Muir Woods and the Marin Headlands. This preservation offers a "bucolic" lifestyle just minutes from the cultural hub of San Francisco.

The Legacy of Housing Resistance

Despite its progressive reputation, Marin has a 50-year history of aggressive "anti-growth" policies that have limited housing production to a trickle. This resistance is often framed as environmentalism but has resulted in some of the highest levels of racial and economic segregation in the state.

Tactic	Description
"The Manifesto"	In 1971, the Board of Supervisors adopted " <i>Can the Last Place Last?</i> ", a policy document that essentially sought to halt population growth, famously referring to potential new residents as "hordes."
Water Moratoriums	In the 1970s and again in the 2020s, the county used limited water infrastructure as a legal lever to block new "hookups" for housing developments.

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CEQA Misuse	The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is frequently used by well-resourced neighborhood groups to tie up developments (from low-income apartments to luxury estates) in years of litigation.
Political Carve-outs	For years, Marin benefited from special state legislation that classified it as "suburban" rather than "urban," effectively lowering its mandatory housing quotas compared to its neighbors.

The Current Shift

The "guerrilla war" against housing is reaching a breaking point. Under new California state laws and stricter **Regional Housing Needs Allocations (RHNA)**, Marin is now required to plan for over **14,000 new units** by 2032. Towns like Sausalito and Fairfax, long bastions of the "no-growth" movement, are currently facing intense legal pressure and "Builder's Remedy" projects that bypass local zoning entirely.

Several high-profile battles in Marin County illustrate the tension between public support for the "concept" of affordable housing and fierce opposition to its actual implementation. These cases often involve the use of environmental and procedural hurdles to block projects that would bring economic diversity to wealthy enclaves.

1. The "Star Wars" Standoff: George Lucas & Grady Ranch

Perhaps the most famous case of "NIMBY" (Not In My Backyard) resistance involved filmmaker George Lucas.

- **The Original Plan:** After 25 years of fighting neighbors to build a movie studio on his land, Lucas gave up in 2012.
- **The "Revenge" Project:** In 2015, he proposed building **224 units of 100% affordable housing** on the site instead, including homes for low-income seniors and the local workforce. He even offered to fund most of the \$200 million project himself.
- **The Hypocrisy:** Neighbors who previously claimed to support "community-friendly" development suddenly pivoted. They argued the project was "sprawl," expressed concerns about "traffic and noise," and even suggested it would be "unfair" to the low-income residents to live so far from urban services—all while living in the same rural area themselves. The project has faced years of delays and litigation.

2. Mallard Pointe: The Battle for Belvedere

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Belvedere is one of the wealthiest cities in America, where "Bad for Belvedere" signs recently lined the streets.

- **The Project:** A developer proposed replacing 22 aging, market-rate duplexes with 40 new units, including a small apartment building with **4 dedicated low-income units**.
- **The Resistance:** A group called *Belvedere Residents for Intelligent Growth* (BRIG) fought the project, arguing that apartment buildings were "strictly prohibited" by local zoning and would destroy the town's character.
- **The Paradox:** Opponents claimed they weren't against housing—just *this* housing—despite the fact that the project provided some of the only new affordable units the town had seen in decades. They used "story poles" (large orange poles showing the height of the buildings) to galvanize opposition based on view obstruction and "massing."

3. Marinwood Plaza: The Segregation Lawsuit

In San Rafael, a 125-unit project designated **100% affordable** for low-income families faced a direct legal challenge.

- **The Project:** The redevelopment of a blighted shopping center into housing for workers making between **\$50,000 and \$120,000** (teachers, first responders, etc.)
- **The Hypocrisy:** A group called the *Marinwood Coalition Against Segregation* filed a lawsuit to stop it. They claimed that building a 100% affordable project was actually "creating segregation" by concentrating low-income residents in one spot—a legal maneuver that used progressive-sounding language to block a project that would have increased diversity. The lawsuit was ultimately dismissed in 2025, but it successfully delayed the project for years.

Common Tactics of Resistance

Tactic	Public Justification	Real-World Impact
Environmental Review (CEQA)	"Protecting local wetlands and wildlife."	Delays projects for years and adds millions in legal costs.
Character & "Massing"	"Maintaining the bucolic aesthetic of Marin."	Prevents multi-family buildings (apartments) in favor of single-family homes.
Infrastructure Concerns	"The roads and sewers can't handle the load."	Weaponizes utility limits (like water) to prevent any new hookups.